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A position the U.S. won't have to apologize for

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By **David Sarasohn, The Oregonian** The Oregonian

In the photo, she looks considerably younger -- more than 16 years younger -- than she looks today. The years since 1995 have left their mark on Hillary Clinton -- the last three as secretary of state, spent largely on long flights to Pakistan, haven't exactly been restful -- but some things endure.

In 1995, as first lady, Clinton addressed the United Nations 4th World Conference on Women, where she was the marquee attraction even without an official position.

"Tragically, women are most often the ones whose human rights are violated," she told the conference, in a speech that largely made her an international figure. "Even now, in the late 20th century, the rape of women continues to be used as an instrument of armed conflict

"If there is one message that echoes forth from this conference, let it be that human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights once and for all."

Late last month, at Georgetown University, in language not particularly diplomatic for a secretary of state, Clinton warned: "Recent events in Egypt have been particularly shocking.... This systematic degradation of Egyptian women dishonors the revolution, disgraces the state and its uniform, and is not worthy of a great people."

After her speech, asked a question about different cultural standards, she responded: "There are certain actions that are beyond any cultural norm. Beating women is not cultural, it's criminal, and it needs to be addressed and treated as such."

Which, even in a complicated world, is not a bad position for a secretary of state.

Or for her country.

Hillary Clinton's steadfastness on this issue may be one reason why she is overwhelmingly the most popular political figure in the country, with an approval rating around 70 percent. At a time when Congress's approval rating is close to single digits, Clinton's number is approachable only by, say, Abraham Lincoln. Last week, Gallup reported that Clinton was once again the most admired woman in the country, far outdistancing Michelle Obama and Laura Bush and even the runner-up: Oprah.

Clinton's cause had a more mixed 2011. Besides the Egyptian military's innovation of stripping female demonstrators and giving them "virginity tests," just down the Red Sea women are being savaged in the endless Somali civil wars. New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof spent much of the year chronicling

the abuse of women from African civil wars to Cambodian brothels.

On the other hand, the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize went to Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Leymah Gbowee of Liberia and Tawakkul Karman of Yemen "for their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women's rights to full participation in peace-building work."

If women's rights, or at least women's safety, is increasingly an international concern, Hillary Clinton has had a lot to do with making it one. Her focus is not just a matter of obvious identity interest; two of the three previous secretaries of state were women, without the issue becoming this prominent.

In September, Clinton told the Women and the Economy Summit in San Francisco, "When it comes to the enormous challenge of our time -- to systematically and relentlessly pursue more economic opportunity in our lands -- we don't have a person to waste, and we certainly don't have a gender to waste."

American foreign policy often consists of complicated choices, picking and choosing, with more hope than certainty, among various foreign politicians, selecting from a wide range of potentially disastrous policy choices. But there's something at once simple and defensible about taking a stance that it's wrong for a people to savage its women, that no country has a gender to waste.

The year 2012 will likely be Clinton's last as secretary of state; there's only so many overnight flights to Pakistan one can make. She won't end up exactly where she wanted, but it will be someplace notable.

Henry Clay allegedly said he'd rather be right than president.

Hillary Clinton achieved it.

David Sarasohn, associate editor, can be reached at 503-221-8523 or dsarasohn@oregonian.com. See other writing at oregonlive.com/sarasohn/